The Modern Urban Park: Access and Programming

where have we been...
where shall we go?

You can’t change what you don’t know;
you can’t fix what you don’t understand.
Introduction

Vivid memories and important connections to the natural world happen in public outdoor areas like city parks, greenways, rails-to-trails pathways, community gardens, public fishing and boating areas, and other special places. Access to outdoor resources has been shown to improve physical and psychological health, increase spiritual rejuvenation, reduce crime and promote a healthy, balanced sense of community. The benefits of these outdoor connections, and others, are numerous and to reap those benefits fully, people must have convenient and safe access to parks and other outdoor recreation resources.

This White Paper provides a brief overview of current trends in urban park access and programming including a synthesis of best practices and sample strategies for engaging urban populations, with a focus on communities of color and those considered underserved or under-resourced. This review and synthesis was commissioned by the Resources Legacy Fund and is based on professional experience in the field, scholarly expertise, and a broad review of related literature; as with all written work, there are still limitations in space and content parameters. Last, while many great examples and models exist coast-to-coast, this briefing offers a cursory look at a variety of examples with no intention of exclusion. A glimpse into the history and evolution of urban parks is first provided offering insight into current efforts and potential directions for future.

The Changing Role of Urban Parks

The role of urban parks has been gradually changing since the mid-nineteenth century when they were first introduced as places of refuge from increasingly congested urban centers. A historical study of city parks\(^1\), for instance, identified four park types based on park characteristics, social objectives and user base: (1) the “pleasure gardens” (1850-1900) were natural, landscaped environments set in contrast to industrialized cities; (2) the “reform parks” (1900-1930) gave birth to playgrounds and provided neighborhood play areas mostly for children of working class and immigrant families; (3) the “recreation facility” (1930-1965) was subsequently born to extend this recreation concept to suburban and urban areas with the inclusion of stadiums, swimming pools and indoor facilities; and (4) the “open space system” (1965-1990) began the trend of public spaces such as streets, plazas and waterfronts being used for recreational purposes. Harnik\(^2\) suggests that interest for urban parks declined after World War II as attention was drawn to more suburban development. Consequently, many city parks deteriorated with insufficient funding for maintenance and operations.

Interest in city parks was renewed in the early 1990s as urban populations began to grow and, in the last two decades, a more sustainable urban park model that addresses both social and environmental issues was born.\(^3\) In addition to providing aesthetic value and a place for recreation, the emerging urban park model also plays a fundamental role in driving economic development, improving public health, providing employment opportunities, and being self-sufficient in the use of natural resources.\(^3,4\) Parks are indisputably becoming an essential component of the social fabric and ecological landscape of urban centers.

This expanding view has sparked an urban park revival and greening projects in major cities across the nation.\(^5\) For instance, there has been an increasing level of involvement by community members, policy makers, landscape architects, conservationists, healthcare providers, social workers, and private corporations in park planning and management forums across the U.S. One excellent example includes the 2012 Greater & Greener conference in New York City, organized in partnership with the City Parks Alliance, where the diversity of participants extended far beyond traditional park professionals and advocates,\(^6\) and lived up to their theme of “Re-Imagining Parks for 21st Century Cities.” (Note: The 2015 conference will take place in San Francisco). The stage is also being set at the national level by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service through the Urban Wildlife Refuge Initiative to conserve urban wildlife systems,\(^7\) and the National Park Service with their commitment to mapping an urban agenda to ensure national parks in urban environments are more relevant and accessible to inner-city residents.\(^8\) The U.S. Forest Service continues to remain on the cutting edge with initiatives such as their urban and community forestry programs and efforts to reach city dwellers (e.g., Discover the Forests).\(^9\) State and city governments and park agencies also play a vital role in leveraging resources and building support for urban parks.
The Case of California

California, with its rich natural and cultural diversity, has been at the forefront of this national movement. The Urban Park Act of 2001 managed by the California State Parks, for instance, provided funds for city and regional park agencies and non-profit organizations to acquire or develop new urban parks, recreational areas or facilities, particularly in under-resourced neighborhoods. This was followed by several other acts including the Urban Park Act of 2006 requiring the CA Department of Parks and Recreation to continue the local assistance programs with a similar vision. Then in 2008, the passing of AB 31 changed the name of the act to the Park Development & Community Revitalization Act consisting of $368 million to be distributed via competitive grants through the Statewide Park Program to invest in “park deficient, economically disadvantaged communities.” Grants have been awarded to over 100 city agencies and non-profit organizations for community-based projects to create new parks in underserved communities throughout the state, yet a comprehensive evaluation of outcomes has yet to be completed.

The need for adequate financial resources and increased voter support for urban parks is vital as California’s population continues to grow and change over the coming years. Currently, nearly 95% of the state’s population lives in urban areas; with Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim (7,000 people per square mile) and San Francisco-Oakland (6,266 people per square mile) being among the nation’s most densely populated urbanized areas. According to the CA State Department of Finance, the total population is expected to reach over 52 million by 2060, nearly 39% higher than the 2012 estimate. The race/ethnic composition is also shifting dramatically, with the Hispanic/Latino population expected to constitute nearly half (48%) of the total state’s population, while non-Hispanic whites will decline from 39% to 30% by 2060. Asians are the second fastest growing racial group, but will remain relatively the same percentage (just above 13%) of the total population. More importantly, as the White “Baby Boomer” population retires in the next two decades, a large percentage of working-age population will be comprised mostly of Hispanics and Asians.

These demographic trends have serious implications for public park agencies in catering park programs and services to culturally diverse user groups as well as grooming the next generation of park managers and advocates. To keep pace with these changes, the multi-year collaborative, Parks Forward Initiative (including M.O.U. signed in 2013), seeks to develop and implement a state park system that can be financially sustainable as well as culturally relevant to all its constituents. Gaining a basic understanding of park utilization patterns and preferences across a diverse demographic of users is an essential part of this multi-stakeholder process.

Park Use and Visitor Preferences: A Sampler

Quantifying park usage can be difficult, but a review of outdoor participation patterns can be a good indicator of visitation. While many park directors believe that outdoor recreation participation is on the rise, a recent national survey, conducted by the Outdoor Foundation, shows that participation rates have remained steady over the last six years. However, research indicates participation among adolescents ages 13-17 has dropped by 9% from 2006 to 2012 while participation among adults ages 25-44 has increased by 9%.

Other studies also indicate a decrease in nature-based activities among youth, with the most popular activities being playing, “hanging out,” biking, running or jogging, skateboarding, and using electronic media outdoors. This declining outdoor youth participation has been explored for nearly ten years now and was first attributed by journalist, Richard Louv, to increased urbanization, sedentary lifestyles, safety concerns and the increasing use of more sophisticated technology. Furthermore, research consistently shows certain populations are less likely to visit public parks and activities vary tremendously by demographics (e.g., race, gender), as well as socioeconomic and geographic considerations.

While these studies provide a national outlook, the 2009 California survey on public opinions and attitudes on outdoor recreation gives a more localized perspective. Nearly 74% of Californians reported visiting a park (note: type of park not specified) within the last month. Youth participated in outdoor activities mostly in parks or areas in their neighborhood (64%), and when outside their neighborhood stayed within their town or city (32%). The Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (CORP) showed that majority of Californians (84%) indicated that outdoor recreation was “important” or “very important” to their quality of life. Moreover, a majority of respondents indicated that viewing scenic beauty (98%) and feeling in harmony with nature (93%) were important aspects of outdoor experiences.
These opinions show that being outdoors and having access to natural environments is an integral part of Californian lifestyle. How, then, can this sentiment be maintained or enhanced in California’s urban parks?

The survey and plan noted above provide a good overview of activity preferences, priorities, perceived constraints and shifts in activity interests of the general state populations. However, different people use parks in different ways; urban park visitation patterns, motivations, and constraints vary based on age, race/ethnicity, income, social class, gender and other factors. The following are broad examples of cultural differences in urban recreation patterns among various demographic groups:

- Ethnic minority groups, in general, participate in outdoor activities in groups larger than the White population.
- Asians value scenic beauty in their park experience, African Americans show a preference for sports facilities, Hispanics are drawn to developed sites that can accommodate large groups, while Whites prefer predominantly all natural habitats.
- Youth and older adults prefer to recreate in parks close to home and in social groups.
- Level of income is associated with participation in different types of activities (e.g., people of middle-high income more commonly participate in activities that require equipment or travel).

It is important to note that the broad Census categories (e.g., African American, Asian, Hispanic) are not homogeneous; subsequently, it is essential to acknowledge that differences exist between racial/ethnic groups as well as within ethnic sub-groups. Given the increasing number of Hispanic/Latino and Asian populations in California, it will be vital for park managers to understand these use preferences to meet the diverse needs of their multicultural audience. It is equally important to understand the attitudes and preferences of non-users and what, if anything, prevents them from accessing and using public parks and services (at all or more often). That is, while the topic of constraints has been explored for several decades, the question continues to surface thereby revealing growing interest in understanding this phenomenon. Park managers ask this question, some visitors seek to know the answers, and even various newspapers, radio stations, and occasionally television productions have covered these important topics asking “why don’t more people of color visit [some] parks...?” Similarly, many ethnic minorities seek to dispel myths showing their enjoyment and, ultimately, park managers have stepped up as community engagement efforts have risen over time and seen great success.

Park Access: Issues and Challenges

The majority of Californians prefer to recreate in parks close to home so park and recreation agencies must ensure safe, accessible park settings are available to meet the needs of current and future populations. Access has many definitions and one simple example is “the ability of people to get to and navigate within a park,” this includes both physical and psycho-social elements. Physical characteristics that relate to access include availability, equitable access, individual access, and within park access. Additionally, there are several other related factors such as safety, program availability, and cultural attitudes that affect access to parks.

Availability typically refers to the amount of green space in a given city or urban area. Interestingly, there is no national standard for recommended urban park acreage, but one commonly used measure is 10 acres per 1,000 residents as suggested by the National Recreation and Park Association. However, it is important to note that each community has a unique blend of social, cultural and economic characteristics and park availability must be evaluated on an individual basis.

Equitable access means equal distribution of parks across different types of neighborhoods. California has millions of acres of federal, state, and locally managed parklands and open spaces that provide places for recreation, education and preservation for the natural and cultural heritage of the state. Yet, a recent study by The City Project indicates there are disparities in distribution of parks in several regions of the state; particularly the Central Valley region and multiple neighborhoods in Los Angeles County have been identified as “park poor” (3 acres or less of park/1,000 residents). Moreover, these regions are populated by a large percentage of ethnic minority communities. Other national studies also confirm the prevalence of inequalities in park access and distribution among low-income and communities of color. Additionally, toxic waste sites and landfills are predominantly located in ethnic minority communities, exposing them to greater environmental hazards. Along these lines, environmental justice advocates speculate this lack of green space among low-income and ethnic minority communities is not a function of unplanned growth but one of historical exclusion of people of color in urban development and planning process.

Individual access relates to the distance one travels to get to a park, how they get there (transportation options), what it costs to get to a park, and/or potential fees for use of park programs and visitor services. Lastly, once at the park, known as within park access, the ability to move around easily can also be an important correlate of park use. As mentioned, while constraints have been studied for several decades, the significance continues in understanding shifts in trends as well as ensuring agencies break down barriers in ways that lead to concrete action and accountability.
Other sample issues limiting access to parks voiced by ethnic minority groups, specifically, include:

- Insufficient funding for parks in communities of color leading to poorly maintained and staffed park facilities
- Concerns for personal safety; parks in under resourced communities are often venues for gang use, violence and crime
- Perceived discrimination from other users or park staff (sometimes also influenced by surrounding neighborhood of parks)
- Lack of diversity in park staff/users leading to perception of feeling uncomfortable or unwelcome
- Language barriers, lack of bilingual/multilingual staff; not knowing who to ask, what to do in parks

There are several physical, cultural and geographic barriers that people from diverse racial backgrounds continue to face in accessing parks and engaging in outdoor recreation. Park managers need to assess and understand what barriers are relevant to the communities they serve, and in what areas and/or park facilities before they can begin to mitigate them. Moving towards social and environmental justice is no longer an option but a necessity in the 21st century.

Current Trends in Urban Park Programming

In an urban setting where there is limited park space, high usage and varied demand for facilities, amenities and activities, park managers are increasingly challenged to meet the needs of different user groups. Providing multiple facilities and space for a variety of activities for people with different interests and skills is only part of the equation. Effective programming is essential for engaging urban residents from diverse backgrounds and creating meaningful and enriching park experiences. While traditional programming consisted mostly of sports leagues, summer camps, and exercise classes, the broadening view of urban parks has created opportunities for innovative programming that can be catered to a more diverse park clientele.

The following is a synthesis of current trends in urban park programming based on a cursory review of literature, policy briefs and organizational reports. A sample of programs follows including a small selection from national, state and local programs and includes examples for each trend.

Active Lifestyles and Driving Forces

While there has always been awareness of the health benefits of parks, there is mounting empirical evidence that parks play a vital role in promoting healthy lifestyles of the American population. Studies show that regular physical activity and healthy diets increase life expectancy, promote psychological well-being and can help children and adults maintain a healthy weight. Yet, less than half (48%) of American adults and fewer than 30% of high school students meet the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines set by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Insufficient exercise is further linked with increasing incidence of obesity (especially among children) and higher risk of related chronic diseases such as diabetes, congestive heart failure, high blood pressure and strokes.

Parks and recreation agencies, along with collaborative efforts, have become an integral part of the solution to address America’s obesity epidemic. Neighborhood parks and playgrounds provide convenient locations for organized sports, exciting recreation programs, and unstructured forms of physical activity. Mobilizing a nationwide effort to combat childhood obesity through active lifestyles and healthy eating, First Lady Michelle Obama launched the “Let’s Move Outside” initiative in 2010. The campaign provides tools and resources for parents to access local parks and plan physical activities, thus promoting family health. Similarly, the Healthy Parks Healthy People (HPHP) initiative is an international movement to share research, as well as innovative practices and programs, focusing on the health benefits of human interaction with nature.
Examples from the indoor to the outdoor gym:

- "Shape Up, New York": Provides fitness zones and fitness programs in parks as another way to attract park users and increase physical activity. This initiative, funded by the New York health department and managed by the city parks department, provides free fitness classes in multiple park and studio locations across the five boroughs. Classes are non-competitive, fun and include varied activities such as aerobics, yoga, Zumba, and Pilates. With a wide variety of options for date/time, fitness level, age and interest, this program has something to offer everyone.

- San Francisco Bay Area, HPHP: Agencies from various sectors—parks, open space, healthcare and public health agencies—are collaborating to expand HPHP programs across the region. The goal is to develop a consistent regional effort to increase access and use of public parks (focusing on communities historically under-represented or with higher health risks), ensure programs that encourage physical activity and improve the overall health of Bay Area residents. Sample efforts by contributing partners: Healthy Trails program by Santa Clara County Parks, and Trails Challenge by East Bay Regional Park District—a free fitness challenge that is fun, adventurous, individual or family activity that introduces urban residents to a variety of parks/trails in their local neighborhoods. Additionally, the HPHP Bay Area collaborative has created a Guidebook for healthcare providers to educate patients on the benefits of park use and encourage outdoor activities through “Park Prescriptions.”

These programs target communities that are historically under-represented in public parks and individuals suffering from, or at a high risk of, chronic disease by providing free and low-cost program options. As noted, a vital ingredient is “something to offer everyone.”

Youth Development ~ “Children can’t bounce off the walls when there are none”

In addition to promoting physical health, spending time outdoors contributes to the social, emotional, mental and educational development of children of all ages. A more contemporary youth development approach has shifted away from viewing young people as problems (i.e., ‘deficit model’) and instead perceives them as resources to be supported through their transition into resilient and healthy adults, thereby viewed as ‘assets’ to our community. An increase in research studies on youth-focused outdoor programs and outcomes in the last 15-20 years provides evidence of the role various park and recreation agencies can play in developing the next generation of park leaders and advocates.

Studies show recreation programs that are structured, intentionally well designed, and adult-supervised can help adolescents build a sense of autonomy, positive social relationships, learn conflict resolution, and aid in both academic success and identity development. Programs that include experiential education, service learning, and outdoor education activities are further associated with building leadership skills, self-confidence and fostering civic engagement among youth. Positive youth development programs are essential resources for ethnic minority youth, especially in urban environments, who face additional challenges such as crime and violence, unemployment, income inequalities and environmental injustice. It is critical for park managers to understand the unique needs of urban youth when planning effective and developmentally appropriate programs. Stated differently, youth are also the future of the parks economy. What they like and would like to do outdoors is, and will be, different in many ways; park management strategies must therefore be thinking about that as well.

Examples from the nature playground and outdoor classroom:

- Wonderful Outdoor World (WOW): An outdoor recreation and environmental education program introducing inner-city youth to the outdoors through an overnight camping experience in public parks, in the heart of their community. This gradual introduction to healthy and fun outdoor experiences helps reduce fear and safety concerns for the young people and their parents/caregivers. WOW was started in Los Angeles in 1995 and continues to enjoy widespread interest and has expanded to other cities nationwide.

- Outdoor Youth Connection (OYC): Empowers youth through outdoor activities, team building activities, and camping to develop both leadership and life skills. OYC is a collaborative effort of California State Parks, California State Parks Foundation, and the Pacific Leadership Institute (affiliated with San Francisco State University). After this experiential training in a state park, youth return to their communities to plan and lead their own outdoor activity and community project for their peers. In the first five years, OYC trained 959 youth from 143 community-based organizations across California.

- Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy: Several youth leadership programs offered in partnership with the National Park Service and Presidio Trust. Set in the heart of San Francisco, these programs (e.g., Linking Individuals to their Natural Communities, Inspiring Young Emerging Leaders, Urban Trailblazers) introduce urban youth from diverse backgrounds to environmental and social issues in their community through workshops, service projects and, in some cases, paid internships.

Establishing baselines and defining what constitutes meaningful experiences for children and youth in nature are vital; direct measures are needed of children’s actual time in nature and the quality of their experiences in the natural world. In their work, Charles and Louv surmise that the relationship between children and nature has been understudied; yet they state results that do exist are generally consistent providing information regarding both the indicators of the current ‘nature deficit’ in children’s lives, and the healthy development benefits via direct experiences they have with nature. Clearly more work is needed.
Seasonal Employment and Career Opportunities

Parks have provided summer employment for youth interested in working as camp counselors, lifeguards, or park attendants, for a long time. These opportunities help youth develop valuable work skills, build confidence and strengthen their connection to the outdoors. In response to the changing ethnic makeup of urban populations, park agencies also seek to increase the diversity of their workforce to better reflect the communities they serve. This need has created a shift in park agencies developing employment programs for teenagers and young adults with a goal of leading to full-time career opportunities in their organization or other park/natural resource-related fields.

Examples from the city to the nation:

■ Parks and People Foundation, Baltimore City: A good example of taking a more holistic approach with their “Green Career Ladder” concept. A series of age appropriate programs are offered starting from elementary school level, through middle/high school, and finally leading into full-time employment opportunities. Programs include environmental education, academic research and mentorship opportunities with environmental science and natural resource professionals. The continued engagement approach ensures a career pathway for young people in environmental-related fields and fosters long-lasting stewardship.

■ Fostering Change Building Futures and Enabling Success, San Diego: Youth job training programs provide work readiness training for youth, ages 14-21. A variety of programs are designed to prepare youth to be productive in the workforce and range from summer internships to support for youth who have dropped out of high school, are at-risk of dropping out, or are transitioning from justice system camps and foster care facilities. The city of San Diego also sponsors a “Connect 2 Careers” program that has established a new approach to preparing California’s future workforce by creating meaningful paid work experiences “beyond the typical summer job.”

■ Youth Conservation Corps (YCC): A summer employment program for youth from diverse backgrounds to work in federally managed public lands. The program is co-managed by the NPS, USFS, FWS and BLM and includes service learning through conservation projects. Programs introduce youth to the significance of conservation in protecting natural and cultural heritage; in the process, they develop a work ethic and other essential job skills. Based on this service model that fosters environmental stewardship among youth, several state, regional and municipal level youth conservation corps were established (e.g., Virginia State Park’s Youth Conservation Corps, East Bay Conservation Corps, San Francisco Conservation Corps).

■ National Park Service: Introduces ethnically diverse urban youth to environmental careers through a variety of youth work experiences coast-to-coast. One example is the summer employment program set in the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. The 6-week program offers specialized training in the outdoors and exposes high school students to a variety of careers within the NPS. The program targets race/ethnically diverse urban youth from local schools, facilitating an enriching cultural exchange between NPS staff and students.

Building Social Capital and Leveraging Resources

Urban parks achieve many objectives, as stated, and they also provide an important social function in merely building community. When neighbors come together based on common interests and work towards shared goals, such as community gardens, urban regeneration projects or membership in “Friends-of” associations, they develop social ties, build trust and become more civic-minded. These social ties, often called “social capital,” are an important asset to the community as they promote democratic citizenship, empower individuals to be change agents and instill a sense of place in their community. Although the benefits may seem intangible, research shows community involvement helps reduce neighborhood crime and violence, lowers levels of aggression, reduces rates of asthma and teen pregnancy, and increases academic success. Urban parks at all management levels (local, state, federal), should be the catalyst to enhance community engagement efforts; everyone wins because stewardship increases and quality of life improves.

Community-driven and supported neighborhood regeneration projects, not only strengthen communities, but also address issues of environmental justice by creating access to green spaces in previously under-resourced neighborhoods. In the 2012 America’s Great Outdoors progress report, the Obama administration advanced the priority of revitalizing urban parks and identified the potential of connecting the large majority of American’s living in urban areas through locally-driven conservation projects. The Parks Build Community initiative, launched by NRPA in 2008, demonstrates the role of parks and recreation in transforming inner-city communities across America. This purposeful neighborhood revitalization and park restoration program demonstrates the importance of public-private partnerships and effective community involvement throughout the planning and implementation process as the key to success in providing parks and services that best meet the needs of the community.
Examples from Brownfields to urban forests:

- Groundwork USA: A national organization working towards renewing underserved communities by transforming liabilities into community assets. Their approach is grounded in engaging local residents, businesses and public agencies in establishing revitalization projects. Programs include reclaiming and transforming Brownfield’s and vacant lots into sustainable green spaces, restoration of urban waterways, youth development (environmental education, conservation projects, job training), and more. A key component of their model is instilling ecological stewardship in local residents and empowering them to improve the physical and social environments of their neighborhoods.

- Washington Parks & People, Washington, DC: Excellent example of a community-based model for park revitalization in urban centers. They won the National Park Service’s highest organizational honor, the Top Community Partnership Award, for transforming the Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park (1.3 miles from the White House) from one of the most violent and crime ridden parks to a safe green haven. Initially started as a neighborhood “Friends” group, Washington Parks & People has grown to a nationally recognized community coalition promoting neighborhood development and economic revitalization, community service, education, arts and culture, and civic engagement.

- Friends of the Urban Forest, San Francisco: A non-profit organization promoting a green urban infrastructure through tree planting, sidewalk gardens, tree care, education and advocacy. All their tree planting programs are community events and include local residents and volunteers. Their work and advocacy over the last two decades has led to the city committing funds for increasing the tree canopy in San Francisco. The Urban Forest Plan detailing this initiative is still under development and a collaboration of the Planning Department, Department of Public Works and Friends of the Urban Forest.

From Multigenerational to Intergenerational—Where Shall They Meet?

A traditional approach to serving urban populations across different age ranges has predominantly occurred through age-specific programming and distinct cohorts. Very little interaction between the age groups (outside of family programs) has occurred in park programming. With an increasing life expectancy, retiring Baby Boomers have strong environmental attitudes, increasingly active interests and more discretionary time to volunteer; a growing interest in mentoring youth has also surfaced over time. The benefits of intergenerational programming for both youth and adults including seniors, is indisputable. Developing intentional opportunities for neighbors across the lifespan to come together in parks, offers an unprecedented direction for building social capital, increasing awareness of park resources, enhancing support for facilities and amenities, and more. There is an untapped potential for park programming, including across CA State Parks in both urban and rural areas.

Examples from nature science to wilderness mentoring and family camping:

- Garden Mosaics (Cornell University): Science education and community action program where youth (ages 10-18) learn about plants and planting practices from older gardeners. This is a model for balancing the knowledge of older adults and scientists in a youth community education and action program. Through interviewing older gardeners, youth learn about plants, planting practices, s as well they learn about different cultures. The youth and adults then post their findings to electronic databases documenting the food growing practices of traditional gardeners, and the role of community gardens in urban neighborhoods.

- The Intergenerational Outdoor School (Penn State University): A residential educational program where 4th graders and older adults are brought together for 4-days to learn about nature and gain insight into other people’s values for caring for the environment. Research shows...
the intergenerational component had a positive impact on both students and adults. For example, students reported feeling more positively about the environment and wanting to protect it; older adults learned that students are receptive to their knowledge and views on the environment.

- **Big City Mountaineers (BCM):** Offers week-long wilderness mentoring programs for low-income, underserved youth focusing on building life skills through challenging outdoor experiences. A unique feature of their program is that each participant is paired with an adult volunteer who serves as a strong role model helping youth develop positive relationships, build confidence, and practice effective communication skills. This 1v1 ratio enables a more intimate opportunity for both youth and adults to learn from each other through shared experiences. Based in Colorado, BCM has program hubs in Oakland, Portland, Seattle, and Chicago.

- **FamCamp**: Established in 1994, this program of California State Parks and the California State Parks Foundation is the largest statewide program introducing camping to underserved areas of our communities who would otherwise not have the opportunity to have an overnight outdoor recreation experience. The campground is usually located close to an urban area and a trailer full of camping equipment is provided. The program seeks to “strengthen human relations by teaching a new form of recreation and promote a safe, affordable recreation activity that involves all members of the community.”

### The Business and Culture of Our Digital Lives

Face it, technology is rewiring our brains and park professionals are becoming part of the phenomenon more and more. There is a continuous challenge to keep pace with the increasingly sophisticated technological landscape of the 21st century. From video games and electronics, to social media and mobile device “apps,” urbanites are in the forefront of the trends and park managers must keep up or get left behind. Millennials (those born between early 1980s–2000s), dubbed the “digital generation,” devote an average of 7½ hours a day to electronic media primarily in an indoor setting. When they are outdoors, however, technology is listed as the third most common outdoor activity. This increasing dependence on technology and consequent sedentary lifestyle has been linked to an increase in health and behavior problems due to lack of contact with nature, reduced development of interpersonal skills, and poor academic performance.

Despite these negative outcomes, technology can and must be used in creative and productive ways to engage people in a medium that is understood and relevant. An exploratory study of urban youth in Los Angeles, for example, found they enjoyed technology-based activities such as geocaching and camera safari more than non-technology based activities such as etching and scavenger hunts. Youth workers recognize there is a need to overcome the technology “language” gap and find innovative ways to incorporate use of technology to positively enhance youth programs. Additionally, social media and other technology mediums can be used to distribute information and educate youth, and even families, about park programs and opportunities. Given the rapidly changing advances in technology and increasing mobility of electronic devices, studies suggest that media use and outdoor time need not be mutually exclusive.

### Examples from digital cameras and the Internet to the Smart Phone:

- **Parks in Focus:** Year-round program providing opportunities for middle school youth from underserved communities to explore and learn about nature through photography, outdoor education, and creative expression through recreation. Managed by the Udall Foundation, the program is delivered through partnerships with national parks and youth-serving and educational organizations. Week-long summer camping trips to northern Arizona and the Grand Canyon National Park for up to 36 participants are also offered and programs also exist in Michigan, Oklahoma, and California.

- **Friends of Acadia, in partnership with the NPS:** Four high school teens were hired in 2011 to spend 10-weeks at Acadia National Park in Maine to develop a strategic plan to engage and enhance visitor experience through the use of social media and other forms of technology. After first year success, the Acadia Youth Technology Team program has continued for subsequent summers implementing and evaluating initiatives proposed in the strategic plan. This has become a model for parks in both remote areas and urban centers alike.

- **Parks Online Resources for Teachers and Students (PORTS):** A free distance learning program that connects children and young teens to CA State Parks from their classroom. Using the power of video-conference technology, students learn about science, history, language, arts, outdoor learning, and other topics. The program targets students with little to no previous exposure to parks; a great tool to educate and introduce young people to the beauty and benefits of their state parks.
Cultural Relevance—Means What and to Whom?

In light of changing demographics and subsequent culture shifts of urban residents, park professionals are constantly asking the question of what it means to be “relevant” to the communities they serve. There is a lot that can be said and written about this topic, the central message is that park managers must be clear on what this means internally to staff, as well as the relationship of relevancy to the communities they are trying to serve. The National Park Service, for example, defines relevancy as “engaging the public, developing a seamless network of parks, and protecting America’s cultural heritage.”

The NPS has developed a strategic framework for doing business and being relevant in the 21st Century that includes redefining their vision for the future, reassessing their organizational culture and moving into an action plan. The NPS has a few good models and this recent report in particular, Keeping Parks Relevant in the 21st Century, provides additional resources for other park agencies to evaluate the relevancy of current programs and services and establish new guidelines for the future.

Chavez suggests the ever so pragmatic “I” triad approach—invite, include, involve—as a tool for developing inclusive and relevant programs for diverse groups. This is an ongoing educational process that promotes two-way communication between the service provider and user groups: Invite diverse groups by providing information through brochures, posters and other marketing materials in multiple languages and include their opinions and listen to their needs through community surveys or feedback forms. The final step requires involving them in the decision making process and ensuring the agencies workforce reflect the diversity of their community. Ensuring cultural relevancy can mean many things programmatically; but it essentially means planning with them and not for them.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Engaging a Diverse Audience: Best Practices & Sample Strategies

Public parks are important resources for enhancing the quality of life for all people. Ensuring access to these valuable resources to the diverse spectrum users (e.g., across age, race/ethnicity, gender, ability, income-level, etc.) is crucial for the longevity and sustainability of the public parks system. This section provides a sample of best practices, strategies and suggestions for enhancing community engagement based on current trends and future needs. “Best practices” are methods or techniques that consistently show results typically better than those achieved with other means and can be used as a benchmark or process of developing and following a more standard way of doing things that CA State Parks can consider using in future. (Note: The concept of best practices is sometimes vague and therefore used with caution; these examples have not been measured nor evaluated rather this list is based on expertise and varied reputable sources as shown in the Endnotes and ‘Additional Resources’ section of this paper).

The best practices that follow are based on review of other agency strategic plans/toolkits, scholarly literature, and professional field expertise (See Additional Resources at end of document for referenced other agency plans). The recommendations are listed in no particular order; and the strategies may be interrelated and overlap between management, administration, programming, outreach, marketing, and other domains of the organization. While this is not an exhaustive list, it provides critical direction for CA State Parks to examine program options and community engagement more holistically in urban areas.

1. Align and/or develop policies, programs and services with the park’s mission and vision
   - Define the role of the state park system in urban environments
   - Get leadership buy-in for pursuing diversity initiatives
   - Disseminate vision and goals throughout the organization

2. Strive to shift organizational culture to embrace shared decision-making processes
   - Invite public and other stakeholder groups in the early stages of program planning, outreach and implementation process
   - Include transportation agencies, landowners, “Friends” groups, and advocacy groups
   - Integrate tribal representation, faith-based organizations and other community organizations that have large ethnic minority membership
   - Include local businesses and potential new business owners and/or concessionaires
3. Establish a culture of collaboration and diverse partnerships that leverage resources to provide adequate funding and programming

- Collaborate with other public park agencies (federal, regional, and municipal), land management and conservation organizations to create a consistent message on the benefits of parks and open spaces
- Partner with public health agencies and private healthcare professionals to increase use of parks for physical activity and promote other health benefits
- Diversify funding sources through public-private partnerships (individuals, corporations, non-profit organizations, private and community foundations, etc.)
- Collaborate with local and national ethnic outdoor groups (e.g., OutdoorAfro, Latino Outdoors, Black Outdoorsman, Asians Outdoors) to develop culturally relevant programs
- Help policy-makers/legislators understand the values of parks and the truth about the challenges needing to be addressed to enhance community connections to the outdoors and promote natural resource stewardship, historic preservation, and cultural heritage

4. Develop a more diverse and knowledgeable workforce

- Provide diversity/cultural competency training for staff members (at all management levels), Board of Directors, and/or volunteers (these should be mandatory and repeated every 2-3 years)
- Hire/engage bilingual staff and volunteers whenever possible
- Establish contacts/relationships with ethnically diverse community groups for targeted recruitment (e.g., Pacific Asian American Women Bay Area Coalition)
- Provide professional development for existing staff

5. Design multi-use parks and provide wide range of programming

- Understand needs/desires of communities being served
- Work with schools, universities and community organizations to develop park-based curriculum and programming
- Host cultural events such as arts, music, theater and festivals
- Create attractions and destinations throughout the park
- Incorporate research studies and apply knowledge of current demographic trends in park use and differences in leisure preferences
- Promote intergenerational programming through outdoor activities, environmental education, community service and more

6. Develop management framework that includes program evaluation through indicators and periodic measurements

- Ensure a continuous cycle of planning, implementation, evaluation, and modification of programs and services
- Conduct periodic internal assessments and publish results
- Survey organizational partners and users, periodically, to rate satisfaction and identify gaps and/or opportunities

7. Develop a comprehensive outreach/marketing plan to reach diverse audiences

- Allocate sufficient staff resources towards community outreach
- Develop knowledge and awareness of local culture
- Work with community groups that serve different segments of the population (e.g., religious organizations, minority business associations, environmental justice organizations, senior citizen’s group, etc.)
- Communicate with diverse groups through a range of media sources (print, website, social media, radio, television, etc.), including ethnic media outlets
- Utilize social media platforms to communicate with youth and young adults
- Audit outreach and education programs to determine how to better reach non-English-speaking residents
- Inspiration is often more important to park users; marketing efforts should inform to engage and inspire.

(Note: The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SAMO) developed an outreach plan in 2011 that can be a good model)

8. Strive to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers to ensure meaningful participations in park programs and services

- Provide information in multiple languages based on ethnic groups being served
- Ensure print/online materials include visual examples of employment and program participation by ethnic minorities, women, older/senior citizens, and youth
- Ensure park facilities, visitor centers, and trails have multilingual signs
9. **Determine access issues and strive to overcome barriers**
   - Evaluate the distribution of surrounding public spaces and determine whether all neighborhoods (and by association all ethnic groups) have a fair and sufficient share of programs, facilities, and services.
   - Provide multiple transit options for getting to a park and navigating within the park (walking/biking, public transport, shuttle service, sufficient parking).
   - Ensure accessible by wide range of people: elderly, people with disabilities, and children.
   - Provide reduced cost options for low-income populations (e.g., scholarships, fee-free hours/days, volunteer exchange, etc.).
   - Keep sites clean and ensure safety from physical hazards and crime within park boundaries.

10. **Develop trust and build long-term relationships with ethnic minority communities**
    - Maintain honesty and integrity in all communications.
    - Recognize community and indigenous knowledge through continuous interaction with community leaders and tribal elders.
    - Provide programs and services that encourage cross-cultural exchanges.

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**Final Thoughts**

There is increasing momentum for the urban parks movement as seen in a multiplicity of new programs, increased use in many locales, innovative use of technology, professional conferences and forums dedicated to urban parks, and support for accredited degree programs in colleges and universities for career enhancement. At this critical juncture, CA State Parks need to reassess and redefine their role in the urban environment and explore new ways of catering to the multicultural population. Many opportunities exist for improving the quality of life of urban residents; subsequently, the importance of inter-disciplinary partnerships and collaborations to share resources, educate the public on benefits of parks, strive for equity and increased safety, and seek diverse funding sources cannot be overemphasized.

The sufficient allocation of resources for inclusive programs and necessary outreach and community engagement to serve diverse audiences is vital for our health and a sustainable future. This relates to the fact CA State Parks must continue educating diverse communities about the need to get park measures on the ballots and vote favorably. State parks, partners, and other park advocates must persuade voters to pass such bond measures and other ballot initiatives. Yet, who decides how this money should be invested? A key issue is governance. Who will make such vital decisions into the future and how? Actions must include school districts, health professionals, the private sector, city, state and national agencies, non-profit organizations, and the communities themselves. Finally, while the benefits to visiting and playing in parks are innumerable, an emphasis on the health benefits of outdoor activities is becoming increasingly more important. A systematic, concerted multi-stakeholder effort is required; change is not possible any other way.
Endnotes


ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


2. National Park Service, 2007 - Best management practices used at urban parks in National and International locations: http://1.usa.gov/1bfGsy0


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